

Drawn to The Flame

At Gravesite, Memories of Kennedy

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By Henry Allen
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Maybe the problem was the weather, which was perfect. If there had been rain or just clouds, the assassination of John Kennedy 30 years ago would have seemed realer. But the sky yesterday was so clear and the sunlight so angled that everything looked like a miniature of itself—the Custis-Lee mansion on the hill over the grave site, the domes of Washington in the distance. Pale in the sun, the eternal flame cast shadows on the stones, suggesting stream water flowing over the grave.

It was a little unreal, in other words.

"Is he actually under there?" people would ask.

Every time you see the assassination on television, it gets less real, and you see it a lot.

"All those television shows," said James Bernard, 45, a salesman from Richmond. "I must have seen him shot 20 times this past week. I don't know why I watch."

"It's the publicity, the whole thing, they keep it going," said his wife Brenda Bernard, 42, a banker.

See GRAVE, D8, Col. 1



BY JUANITA ARIAS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Sister Loyola Kang from Korea was among the many who made the pilgrimage to the Kennedy grave yesterday.



Wendi Connell, Jimmy Patterson and Autumn Wittlake at Arlington Cemetery yesterday, the day before the 30th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination.

Reality and the Grave

GRAVE, From D1

They were with Henry LaFond, 41, a paperworker from Fitzwilliam, N.H. He was asked if visiting the grave meant a lot to him.

"Not really," he said.

Jon Heath, 26, a computer analyst from Atlanta, said the fascination with Kennedy is "all marketing that masks what's going on, the possibility of a coverup."

"All calculated," said his wife Liddy Heath, 26.

So why were they there?

"What a time in history," said Liddy Heath. "And I have to say I'm still moved by it, moved by the romance of the time back then."

Nobody seemed completely sure why they came but they keep coming up the paths at Arlington National Cemetery, 4.5 million people a year.

Yesterday there was an American Eskimo dog named Snowy, a Dominican nun, men in blue caps with the names of naval ships on them in gold—the USS Knox, the Coral Sea; an older Japanese woman waiting in a grim, grade-school pose to have her picture taken by a daughter who has learned the pivotty, hipshot, slouching shampoo-ad restless demeanor that is one of America's exports to the world; high school kids in tiny glasses and huge Doc Martens shoes; tentative, arrogant college boys who appear to have spent 25 minutes apiece getting their hats at just the right angle; old guys in earmuffs, plaid hats, Kangol car caps, and jackets advertising Boilermakers Local 641 and the West Park Slovenian Club; old gals wearing drug-store sunglasses and smoking cigarettes; whole families that are fat as only Americans can be, dressed in running suits and climbing the steps with their heads held up like swimming dogs; babies waving frantic, padded, uncomprehending arms as if they'd just come back to a house destroyed by an earthquake.

The crowds climbed the steps wary and resigned. When they came back down they looked preoccupied, as if thinking about what they should think about next. You'd say to them: Kenne-

dy was in office less than three years, he didn't get much done, a lot of scandal has emerged since he was killed, and it's 30 years ago anyway.

It didn't matter, they said. He lives on, we create the Kennedy we want, we see him resurrected along with Elvis on the covers of supermarket tabloids. What's important is what he stood for, what he promised, what he was rather than what he did and what he inspired. And it was the sense of something lost.

"I don't know whether it's midlife crisis, but I remember we thought we were pretty hot stuff back then," said George Dunn, 41, a teacher from South Lebanon, Ohio. "At least until he got killed."

It was a time when America figured it could afford the youth, the shallowness, the beauty, the random energy of a Kennedy as president. Kennedy was a luxury, but we never got to find out if we could afford him.

Kennedy understood that Americans had come to admire personality more than character. He was the only president who ever looked good in sunglasses. He had a fabulous speed of manner—at a press conference, say, smiling a small smile at reporters who knew he knew they didn't know he didn't know either.

The German philosopher Hegel saw Napoleon in a woods near Jena and called him "the world soul on horseback." Was Kennedy the world soul in his rocking chair, in a thousand touch football games, 10,000 waves from airplane doors, a million television sets? The world soul smiling sardonically; tapping his teeth with impatience; watching Marilyn Monroe sing happy birthday; playing nuclear chicken with the Russians—this might explain his celebrity, even after 30 years.

"Outside this country he is the best-known president," said Enrique Romero, 23, an American University student from Spain.

Behind him, a plane floated down toward National Airport, looking alarmingly buoyant, as if this sun and clarity might hold it up in the sky for hours.

"It was very big news in Japan," said

Wakako Terada, who at 28 was born after the assassination. She was guiding a tour of middle-aged Japanese businessmen. "It was communications by satellite so we knew right away but here it was afternoon and in Japan it was early morning."

Did these men in her tour remember where they were when they heard the news?

They were young, they said.

No, did they remember where they were, exactly, precisely?

There was a special edition of the newspaper, they said.

They didn't understand the importance Americans put on remembering exactly where they were when the news came from Texas.

Martin Mack, 52, a salesman from Silver Spring, said: "I was in an elevator in the NBC building in New York, going up to the 14th floor. At the fifth floor somebody got on and said the president had been shot."

But Kennedy did so little, had so many flaws.

"He was more than just a man," he said. "It's the whole thought."

That was the grave site yesterday: memories, mystique, a missed chance, a lost time, even the wonderful weather—the whole thought.